

BROOKLYN RAIL

IN MEMORIAM

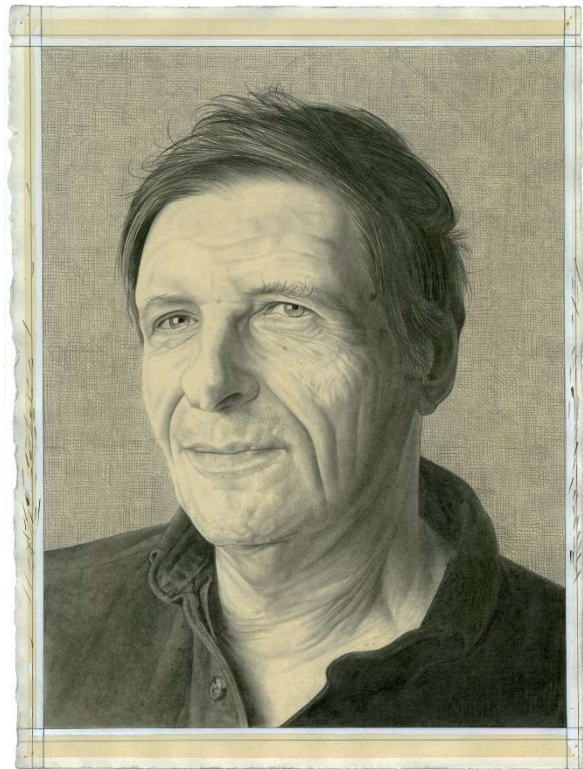
Lewis Warsh: Part of His History

1944-2020

By Steve Clay

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Working with Lewis Warsh was always an effortless pleasure and indistinguishable from our friendship. I first met him in Brooklyn in 1995, introduced by Mitch Highfill. We spoke about his archive and collection of rare books he wanted to sell, and arranged to meet at his apartment. During that visit I looked at his treasures, among which was a small book he'd assembled by hand when he found a set of black and white photographs taken in 1968, primarily on Bustin's Island, Maine and in Bolinas, California. The photographs were classic family-style vacation snapshots of Lewis and Anne Waldman, Ted, Sandy, and Kate Berrigan, Tom, Angelica, and baby Juliet Clark, Joanne Kyger, Jack Boyce, and others. Lewis had mounted the photos into a store-bought hardcover photo book, then typed captions and placed them across from the pictures: The front cover read *Bustin's Island '68*.



Portrait of Lewis Warsh, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

I immediately proposed that Granary Books publish an edition. I was impressed with the spontaneity of the photographs and the sincerity of the writing. They gave me a private glimpse into a community of poets whose work and stories I knew but was now seeing in their formative years as friends and collaborators. It's a remarkably lucid portrait of a time and place. The captions, written 28 years after the fact, brought perspective to the changes during the intervening years. Lewis located the negatives and we were able to include photographic prints and letterpress text for our 1996 edition of 70 copies. *Bustin's Island '68* was the first of several publishing projects we did together and provided an opening to a friendship and working relationship that continued until his death. My copy of the book is poignantly inscribed by Lewis "For Steve, Tender memories."



Kate Berrigan, Anne Waldman, and Lewis, 1968. Photo: Ted Berrigan. Included in *Bustin's Island '68*.

It's an impossible task to condense all the details of Lewis's life in the space of this remembrance, but in 2011 I had the opportunity to interview him for an issue of the journal *Mimeo Mimeo*, and he generously shared many of the important moments in his trajectory as a writer.*

Lewis was a native New Yorker, born in 1944 to Harry and Ray Warsh, and raised in the Bronx. Although he lived the majority of his life in Brooklyn and Manhattan, he spent significant periods of time in California in the 1960s and Western Massachusetts in the 1970s. In each of these places he embodied the roles of poet, editor, and publisher—writing and thinking within a rich bi-coastal community he was quietly instrumental in creating.

Lewis began writing poetry at age 15 while at Bronx High School of Science, trading insights with fellow classmates Charles Stein, Jonathan Greene, and Samuel R. Delany in an informal trans-borough poetry cohort of teenagers called "the club." As Lewis recalled, "[Delany] was a senior ... when I was a junior and had already written seven novels. So it was very useful to be around someone who was so devoted to writing, and so tireless. He set the bar very high, encouraged me, recommended books."

Lewis's initial investigation of poetry with these friends, and his careful, eager study as a teenager of works such as the groundbreaking 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald Allen, led to further commitment as a student of writing at City College (CCNY). Delany, also studying there, continued to be an important influence, and Lewis, in the first of many stints as editor, became poetry editor of *Promethean*, the college literary magazine. In the fall of 1963, still at CCNY and just as he was beginning to immerse himself in the work and lives of the New York School poets, he took a class with Kenneth Koch at The New School and wrote the poem "The Suicide Rates," dedicated to Liam O'Gallagher. It became his first book, published by Toad Press in 1967.

Lewis first visited California in 1963 at age 19 and for the rest of the 1960s would return periodically to visit and live in San Francisco, Bolinas, and Stinson Beach, becoming connected to a circle of poets there, including Harris Schiff, Larry Fagin, Liam O'Gallagher, Joanne Kyger, Bill Berkson, Robert Creeley, and Tom Clark. His first night in California was revelatory. Schiff took him to Gino and Carlo's, the bar where Jack Spicer and his circle hung out. "We all sat around a table in the back," he recalled of his first encounter with the luminary, "and Spicer asked me what I did and I said I was a writer, which was the wrong thing to say—people kicked me under the table. I was supposed to say, 'I'm a poet.' I felt like I failed my first test." But he wasn't discouraged, adding, "I just didn't want to be this person who sat at Spicer's feet. An acolyte. It was more my nature to try to think things out for myself."



Lewis in San Francisco, 1963. Photo: Liam O'Gallagher.

A return trip to San Francisco in 1965 was truly life-changing. During this brief two month visit, he took classes at San Francisco State and attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference—a major event and singular moment in non-academic American poetry. Many of the poets published in *The New American Poetry* were in attendance, giving seminars, lectures, and readings, including Charles Olson, Joanne Kyger, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Spicer, and Robert Duncan, along with younger poets such as Ed Sanders, Ted Berrigan, and Lenore Kandel. The night of the Duncan reading Jonathan Cott introduced Lewis to an old high school friend, Anne Waldman, who was visiting from New York. There was an immediate connection—they spent the rest of the summer together in San Francisco and travelled to Mexico City before returning to New York.

Back in New York, Lewis moved into an apartment at 33 St. Mark's Place while Anne finished her last year at Bennington College in Vermont. Driving back from Bennington in early 1966, Anne and Lewis decided to start *Angel Hair* magazine, inspired by all the poets and small presses they had been studying. "It seemed like the way to go—to publish our own poems alongside those of all these poets we were reading. My own education as a poet was a direct function of my engagement with these magazines and books. There was never a question of not doing it or how to do it—it was like breathing."



Best and Company picnic, Staten Island Ballfield, Easter Sunday, 1968. Back row, left to right: Peter Schjeldahl (with hand on head), Jim Carroll, Linda Schjeldahl, George Kimball. Next row, left to right: Susan Kimball (with dark glasses), Lewis Warsh,

Between 1966 and 1978 they published six issues of *Angel Hair* magazine and over 70 books, pamphlets, and broadsides. In the process, they helped identify and nurture a generation of innovative, groundbreaking poets, writers, and artists, including many associated with the newly-formed Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, where Anne became director. Their home on St. Mark's Place was only a few blocks from the Poetry Project and quickly became a social center for poets and artists, with dozens of regular visitors, including Ted Berrigan, Dick Gallup, Jim Brodey, Lee Crabtree, George and Katie Schneeman, Jim Carroll, Bill Berkson, Larry Fagin, and Harris Schiff.



Lewis and Bernadette Mayer with Marie (on Lewis's lap), Sophia (center), and Max (held by Bernadette).

In 1975, Lewis moved to New England with poet Bernadette Mayer, who he'd known for years in New York City poetry circles. They decided somewhat impulsively to leave the city and have a child together and ended up having three. They first lived in Worthington, Massachusetts, where their daughter Marie was born, then Lenox, where Sophia was born, and lastly in Henniker, New Hampshire, where Max was born. For five years they were able to devote their lives primarily to raising their family and writing. In 1977, they founded United Artists Books and began editing and publishing the mimeograph magazine *United Artists* as well as numerous

books. Although removed from the intense social life that defined their lives in New York, they sustained many of their friendships through correspondence and publishing, and became close with a small group of poets in the area including Clark Coolidge and Paul Metcalf. In addition to working on *United Artists*, Lewis wrote numerous poems and *Agnes and Sally*, his first novel, and Bernadette wrote *Midwinter Day*, her most well-known book, focused on their life in Lenox over the course of one day. They also collaborated on *Piece of Cake*, a diary written in August of 1976 and published by Station Hill Press in late 2019. Lewis often marveled at this period in their lives, particularly their time in Lenox where he and Bernadette were incredibly productive and happy.

Lewis began teaching in the 1970s—a natural extension of his writing, publishing, and collaborating. His first experience was at the Poetry Project, a now-legendary workshop that began in 1973 and went on for two years with, as he described it, "the same cast of characters," including Bill Kushner, Patricia Spears Jones, Robin Messing, Yuki Hartman, Maggie Dubris and Richard Edson. In the early '90s he was asked to teach another workshop, focused on editing the Project's magazine, *The World*. It became another two-year journey with an equally committed cohort, resulting in six issues of the magazine and lifelong friendships. In 1997 he taught another workshop that again became a dedicated poetry community. It was scheduled to last ten weeks but continued for six years, meeting at poet/performer Be LaRoe's loft. The group included Peter Bushyeager, KB Nemcosky, Lydia Cortes, Ruth Altman, and Denis Moritz. Three years in, Lewis suggested the group start their own cooperative publishing company. They named it Ten Pell Books and published nine titles in all. It was at a Ten Pell launch party at Be's loft in 2000 that Lewis met playwright and director Katt Lissard, and they married in 2001.



Katt Lissard and Lewis, City Hall, New York. January, 2001. Photo: KB Nemcosky.

Lewis's academic teaching began in the mid-1980s, initially as an adjunct professor, "roaming the city, teaching in different schools, with a few forays into New Jersey," and included various stints at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University. In 2001 he became professor of English and Creative Writing at Long Island University, Brooklyn and was the founding director of the MFA program in creative writing there in 2007. Lewis was happy in this new role because it connected his "writing, publishing and teaching, in some complicated but positive way ..." adding, "there's been a lot of satisfaction doing this program, and as always most of it has to do with the students." The program drew students interested in experimental poetry and the New York School and he welcomed them into his poetic community and inspired them by his example to write, to get their work published, and to publish others. The satisfaction went both ways. Lewis

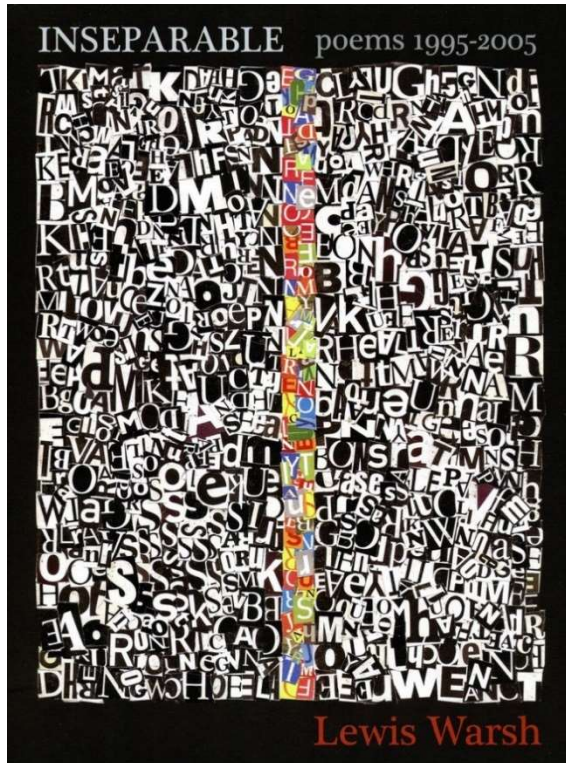
was a popular, beloved teacher, known for his intense interest in his students' writing and lives, his compassion, humor and, as always, his generosity.

This generosity kept Lewis connected to not only younger generations of writers but to new independent publishers like poets Matvei Yankelevich and Anna Moschovakis of Ugly Duckling Presse. Lewis published Matvei's *Alpha Donut* in 2012 through United Artists and Ugly Duckling published Lewis's *Alien Abduction* in 2015.



Lewis with Long Island University MFA students. Left to right: Tony Iantosca, Chia-Lun Chang, Daniel Owen, Sarah Anne Wallen, Lewis, Lisa Rogal. Photo: John Casquarelli.

As a result of his publishing projects and commitment to a wide-ranging community of poets and poetry, Lewis was a central figure within the so-called second generation of the New York School and the concurrent renaissance of small press and mimeograph publishing. He continued to publish books through United Artists, the last one Barbara Henning's *Digigram*, in early 2020. His own thirty-five books, including poetry, fiction, translation, and autobiography, were published by small or independent presses such as Coach House, Sun & Moon, Boke, Ferry Press, Kulchur, Fiction Collective, Corinth, and Adventures in Poetry, as well as Angel Hair and United Artists. Throughout his career as a writer and publisher, he frequently worked with artists to produce the covers of his books and magazines, including Joe Brainard, George Schneeman, Louise Hamlin, Rosemary Mayer, Archie Rand, and Pamela Lawton.



Cover of *Inseparable* (2008) with Lewis's collage *Untitled* (2006)

captivating letter collages *Untitled* (2006) on the cover. The chaotic arrangement of letters then gives way to the poetry.

Lewis was also a talented and dedicated visual artist, whose collages first appeared together with his translation of poetry by Robert Desnos, *Night of Loveless Nights*, soon to be republished by Ugly Duckling Presse. The *Mimeo Mimeo* interview concludes with Lewis talking about that early collage work and the transition to his more recent "letter" collages. "So I was doing image-based collages and artist's books with collages and texts until 2006, when I began cutting out letters and pasting them onto poster boards. It opened up a whole new door. No images, just letters. I realized I could make shapes and grids with the letters. And then I realized I could use some constraints. I did a 16 × 20 inch collage where the only letter is the letter 'e'—sort of like an answer to George Perec. There it was—the capital E's battling the lowercase e's. It looks obsessive and crazy ... I'd like to think there's a connection between my writing and my collage work." The clearest example of that connection is Granary Books's 2008 publication of Lewis's

Inseparable: Poems 1995–2005. It's a beautiful book with one of his "obsessive, crazy" completely

Lewis was blessed with an extraordinary memory and in his interviews and conversations one encounters an impressive degree of detail replete with an abundance of precise names, dates, addresses, together with emotional context and relevant background information. These memories and conversations are very often distilled in his poetry. *Bustin's Island '68* tapped into this care for memory and his willingness to preserve and bring it into the present. In my last conversation with Lewis, he expressed concern that he was unable to complete the project of organizing his papers and completing work on a book of correspondence. In an echo of our first meeting, I quickly offered to help his family carry forward the work of a great poet and dear friend.



Lewis at the Graffiti Bridge, 2016, Pensacola, Florida. Photo: Jamey Jones.

*All quoted material is from Lewis Warsh interview with Steve Clay, *Mimeo Mimeo*, no. 7, "The Lewis Warsh Issue" and his introduction to *The Angel Hair Anthology* (Granary Books, 2001). Steve Clay thanks Katt Lissard, Marie Warsh, Julie Harrison, and Mary Catherine Kinniburgh for their excellent editorial assistance in preparing this article.

Contributor Steve Clay

Steve Clay is the publisher of Granary Books, as well as an editor, curator, archivist, and writer specializing in literature and art of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. He is the author or editor of several volumes including, most recently, *Intermedia*, *Fluxus*, and the *Something Else Press: Selected Writings* by *Dick Higgins*.